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Tacitus (Ancients in Action)

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This slender book from the "Ancients in Action" series aims to win readers for Tacitus. Its judicious combination of sample passages, literary and historical context, and modern parallels ought to do just that.

Tacitus is introduced in three chapters, the first on the "so-called 'Minor Works'", the second on the *Histories* and *Annals*, the last and, curiously enough, longest on the reception of two figures whose reputation was made in Tacitus' historical works, Julius Civilis and Arminius. A parting envoi and list of works for further reading broaden the perspective and provide the curious with a practical entree.

The book begins with George Orwell and the question of what provokes a person to take pen in hand, particularly a person like Tacitus who didn't do so until middle age. Obviously a speculative section, but the question "Why write?" enlivens the quick overview herein of the Roman world from Nero to Nerva. In essence the first answer is: pressure of contemporary circumstances, particularly the ominous parallels between the aftermaths of Nero and Domitian. But Ash (hereafter A.) does not stop with the political context. Each of the works considered in this chapter is further contextualized in literary and/or historical terms. The generic hybridity of the ostensibly biographical *Agricola* is well demonstrated. I don't find the explanation advanced for the mixture particularly compelling--"to reinforce the idea (however disingenuously) that this work constitutes the halting efforts of an author trying to regain his voice" (p. 27)--but the demonstration itself problematizes what could be taken as a bland and predictable genre. If curiosity results, the reader will need (per design, I expect) to turn to the text, for the work is here represented only by its opening and closing sections. For the *Germania* the context is double: on one hand, the Roman penchant for seeing its present as a decline from a morally superior past, on the other, the propaganda associated with Domitian's conquest of Germany. The ethnography of the German nation and its several tribes serves as a curious "mirror" (A.'s word, p. 31) for Rome itself, showing less about the German and more about the Roman reality. And this very distinction between German and Roman in a work published in 98 undermines the implicit claim of Domitian's AD 83 triumph over Germany: it was "almost to suggest that Domitian's campaigns hadn't happened at all" (p. 37). One may doubt whether the *Germania* is also a "manifesto for the future" (p. 37) and a game plan, so to speak, for Trajan, without denying the success of A.'s analysis. The *Dialogus* remains the most baffling of the three works, and I'd have liked to see a discussion of the role of the opening scene for the interpretation of the work as a whole,

but A. does well to highlight the open-endedness of a short dialogue that ends with a promise of future discussion. The chapter ends with a tantalizing example of the layers of meaning that a Roman reader might find beneath the surface of Tacitus' text. Frustrating, perhaps, for a present-day reader, but also an indication of how much there is to find in an ancient text if one really digs in.

In Chapter 2, "The Peak of Creativity," the question "Why write?" returns with a focus on the difficulties and rewards of writing history. The discussion nicely illustrates the differences between the ancient genre and its modern counterpart, the "moralising agenda" (p. 61) and the danger to the historian chief among them. Specifically Tacitean elements such as his emphasis on analysis, his use of sources, and his generosity with *exitus* scenes emerge in the following discussion of the *Histories* and *Annals*. Particularly fine is the explanation of Tacitus' type scenes as providing "a kind of 'photo-negative' of traditional Roman historiography" (p. 72), especially in connection with the civil wars. A. gamely tackles the unsettling ethnography of the Jews in the truncated book 5 of the *Histories*, suggesting that if we had all of Tacitus' narrative of the Flavian conquest of Judaea the point of the contrast between the messy internal/external fight against Civilis and "the more reassuring character of the Jewish war" would be clearer. Devotees may have their doubts about "reassuring" as a characterization for anything in Tacitus, but any reader will see that the historian engages with questions of large and enduring significance. The way Tacitus himself sets the past in "meaningful dialogue with the present" (p. 85) is the focus of much of the discussion of the *Annals*, which begins with the inevitable question of why Tacitus, having followed the Flavians to the end of their story, went back to the Julio-Claudians. A.'s suggestion, that the *Annals* would show "why the civil wars of AD 68-9 erupted" and "explore the structures of the earlier principate that the Flavians, each in different ways, were remodelling" (p. 80), offers little by way of explanation for the prevailing gloom of the work, but her presentation of some signal allusions (to Sallust, to Livy, to Tacitus' own words) shows neatly how he creates the rich texture from which that gloom emanates. The discussion concludes with Tacitus' challenge to his readers: Why does he write, and why should they read, this "trammelled and ignoble" work (p. 88, translating *Ann.* 4.32.2 *in arto et inglorius*)? Part of the reason is the power of the genre in the present (witnessed by the trial of the historian Cremutius Cordus), and part is the guilty pleasure (or, in Tacitus' terms, *misera laetitia*, *H.* 2.45.3, quoted p. 90) of viewing low points of the human past. Low points such as the final scene analysed, chosen for its *enargeia*, Tigellinus' party on Agrippa's pool in the Campus Martius, followed by Nero's "wedding" to Pythagoras, *uni ex illo contaminatorum grege* (*Ann.* 15.37). How could a reader not want more?

Chapter 3, "From Hellraisers to Heroes: The Afterlife of Julius Civilis and Arminius," gives Tacitus credit for putting Civilis and Arminius on the historical map, but has otherwise rather little to do with Tacitus' accounts of these two enemies of Rome, who became national symbols for the Netherlands and Germany respectively almost despite Tacitus. Where he portrays men who are essentially insiders deviously intent on exploiting Rome's weaknesses--civil war conditions in the case of Civilis, complacency in the case of Arminius--the later tradition celebrates them as heroic freedom-fighters and exemplars for future generations. The gap is particularly evident in the case of Civilis, and the relevance of this section to Tacitus' account in *Histories* 4 and 5 is almost nil. The discussion of Arminius/Hermann, who gets a modicum of praise from Tacitus--encapsulated in the famous line *liberator haud dubie Germaniae* (*Ann.* 2.88.2)--reveals a little more about Tacitus' *Annals*, in that A. shows how the character Arminius became "three-dimensional and real" (p. 131) in Tacitus' hands, and provides some lovely

snippets of the text (*Ann.* 1.55, 1.59, 1.61, 2.88), but once again Tacitus' work seems like a springboard, not a source, for later developments. The chapter does begin, however, with a useful account of the thin thread of transmission that carried Tacitus' historical works from antiquity to their first printed editions.

Introducing the stylist and historian Tacitus to a readership with little or no Latin and not much in the way of Roman history either is no easy feat. Modern parallels are tricky, since they rarely have the universal familiarity they need even at the time of publication, and generally have a fairly short half-life. However, even for the reader (like the present reviewer) who recognizes few from the rich array offered in this book--e.g., Esther Hautzig (p. 14), Martin Bell (p. 20), James Cain (p. 27), *Capricorn One* (p. 35), Goskomizdat (p. 55), Konrad Kujau (p. 64)--the rhetorical gesture of seeking and finding modern parallels keeps things lively. More could perhaps have been made of the power and lasting influence of Tacitus' accounts of early imperial Rome, but it is no demerit for this book if the reader who advances hence to the works of Tacitus finds even more there than was promised here.